



4600 Giant Springs Road  
Great Falls, MT 59405  
May 26, 2006

Ladies and Gentlemen:

You recently received documents (an Environmental Assessment and the Beckman Wildlife Management Area – Roe Ranch Habitat/Grazing System Plan, with accompanying Stipulations and Justifications) relating to the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposal to construct boundary and internal fences and a livestock watering system and to implement a rest-rotation grazing system on the Beckman Wildlife Management Area (BWMA) and the neighboring Roe Ranch.

No modifications were made in the documents you received after the public review period. Please consider your previous copies of the Environmental Assessment and Draft Beckman Wildlife Management Area – Roe Ranch Habitat/Grazing System Plan, with the stipulations of this Decision Notice, as final.

Comments received regarding the Beckman Wildlife Management Area – Roe Ranch Habitat/Grazing System Proposal are summarized in the enclosed Decision Notice. No changes have been made to the draft Environmental Analysis after consideration of public input. It is my recommendation to move forward with the proposed grazing system on the Beckman Wildlife Management Area and Roe Ranch.

Thank you very much for your interest and involvement.

Sincerely,

Gary Bertellotti  
Regional Supervisor  
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks  
4600 Giant Springs Rd.  
Great Falls, MT 59405  
(406) 454-5840

## **DECISION NOTICE**

### **BECKMAN WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA – ROE RANCH Habitat/Grazing System Plan Proposal**

Prepared by Region 4 Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. May 26, 2006.

#### **PROPOSAL**

Replace and construct approximately 6.5 miles of boundary fence and 7.5 miles of internal fence; install 1 cattle guard; refurbish existing stock watering system; and install 5.0 miles of new stock water pipeline with 3 water troughs on the Beckman WMA. When construction is completed a 12 pasture rest-rotation grazing system on 4,921 acres of the Beckman Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and 2,695 acres of the adjacent Roe Ranch will be implemented.

#### **MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT PROCESS**

FWP is required to assess impacts to the human and physical environment under the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). The Beckman Wildlife Management Area – Roe Ranch Habitat/Grazing System Plan Proposal and its effects were documented by FWP in an Environmental Assessment.

A 30-day public comment period ran from April 18<sup>th</sup> through May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006. Public notices of the proposed action were placed on the FWP web site and were announced in a news release to the area newspapers (Great Falls and Lewistown). The draft Beckman WMA – Roe Ranch Habitat/Grazing System Plan Proposal and Environmental Assessment were made available to the public on the FWP website. Hard copies of these two documents were available at the FWP area office in Great Falls and Lewistown and were offered via mail to anyone requesting them.

#### **SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS**

Solicitation of public input resulted in receipt of 1 comment. The comment was received as a 1-letter response. FWP met with the respondent and fully addressed his questions, concerns and recommendations. Below are the questions and salient points that were made in that 1 letter written response, with FWP's responses:

1 – The respondent suggested, and wanted to know, that the grazing lease could be terminated if necessary. *FWP grazing leases have specific language that does address the termination of leases following written notice, when necessary.*

2 – The respondent wanted to know what the primary wildlife species are that the habitat and grazing plan was designed to enhance. *In addition to the Beckman WMA – Roe Ranch Habitat Grazing System Plan the Beckman WMA Management Plan is more detailed. The Beckman WMA is managed primarily for mule and white-tailed deer. Secondary species of importance are: sharp-tailed grouse, ring-necked pheasants, Hungarian partridge, and Merriam's turkey. Numerous other wildlife species (e.g. furbearers and non-game wildlife species) are benefited by the habitat made available on the Beckman WMA and Roe Ranch. A small number of elk are now utilizing the Beckman WMA seasonally, though their use is not encouraged.*

3 - The respondent wanted to know how the vegetation would be monitored. *A FWP plant ecologist will utilize FWP's Vegetation Monitoring Manual (Harrington, 2005) and Browse Evaluation By Analysis of Growth Form (Keigley and Frisina, 1998) to monitor change and condition of riparian (woody plant species) vegetation along the Judith River, change and condition of browse plant species in upland draws, and the change and condition of residual grasses and forbs in the upland grasslands. The NRCS is also expected to establish photo plots as an additional method to monitor vegetation on the Roe Ranch.*

4 – The respondent questioned why \$6.22 per AUM was used, which he thought was/is “substantially below the prevailing private, state, and federal grazing rates”. The respondent also suggested that the \$6.22 rate be justified and explained. *The \$6.22 per AUM is the Department of Natural Resources Conservation (DNRC) rate for 2006. FWP customarily uses the DNRC rate when lessees are required to provide fence, weed, and cattle management, for example, to make complicated WMA grazing systems function as planned. (FWP also uses a higher, state averaged, grazing rate when the lessee is not responsible for maintenance or operation of the grazing system.) The DNRC (\$6.22) grazing rate changes annually. The DNRC rate in effect at the time the Beckman WMA grazing lease is consummated will be the rental rate used on the lease. The costs of electricity for operating 3 stock watering systems, the savings to FWP for not having to maintain fences and deal with trespass livestock and cattle management, the inclusion of the Roe Ranch property into the grazing system, the Roe Ranch not increasing livestock numbers on their property, the value of having wildlife habitat improved and wildlife carrying capacity increased on both properties, and the value of the Roe Ranch allowing free, unlimited, walk in public hunting as a stipulation of the grazing system lease were tallied and these values were then compared to the \$6.22 AUM rate when cattle are grazed on the Beckman WMA. This resulted in a determination that payment in services rendered by the Roe Ranch would more than compensate for the value of the AUMs grazed. The respondent also made reference to the prevailing private, state and federal grazing rates. Currently the average grazing rate for an AUM in Montana is \$16.20, the US Fish and Wildlife Service AUM rate is \$15.72, the Montana DNRC rate is \$6.22, and the BLM and US Forest Service AUM rate is \$1.56.*

5 – The respondent questioned whether 6 horses and 12 bulls were included in the total AUMs in the grazing system. *The EA and habitat grazing system plan does account for 6 horses and 12 bull AUMs – they are part of the total AUMs.*

6 – The respondent asked if a cost/benefit analysis had been conducted. *FWP has not conducted a formal cost/benefit analysis for this proposed habitat grazing system. However, in comparison to other WMA (or other public land) grazing systems this proposed habitat grazing system plan, with the inclusion of the Roe Ranch property, with projected length of lease, will be cost effective relative to acres of habitat improved that are open to free public hunting.*

7 – The respondent asked if the stocking rate for the grazing system could be reduced, because of drought e.g.. *FWP and DNRC range scientists calculated the stocking rates per pastures and determined that stocking rates in this system were compatible with drought conditions. It should be noted that 5 of the 6 pastures grazed each year are pastures that had received a complete year's rest from grazing the year before. And, 1 of the 6 pastures grazed each year is a pasture that is deferred until current season's vegetative growth is physiologically complete (seed ripe).*

8 – The respondent noted that there was no mention of noxious weed control in the EA for the Beckman WMA. *FWP's R4 Wildlife Management Area management staff is responsible for weed control on all WMAs within Region 4. To date their efforts have been very effective in*

*reducing the occurrence of noxious weeds on the Beckman WMA. A Region 4 Noxious Weed Management Plan and a Beckman WMA Weed Management Plan are in effect.*

9 – The respondent noted that there was no mention of food plots. *The Beckman WMA Hay Lease addresses the seeding, fallowing and rotation of food plots on the WMA. Currently there are 15 acres in 2 or 3 of 5 fields that are planted to grain crops and left standing for wildlife each year. These food plots are spaced up and down the Judith River for optimum availability to wildlife. The proposed habitat grazing system will allow for the grazing of 1 small 4-acre food plot during April and May every third year. It's anticipated that June precipitation on the river pasture grazed in April/May, should be sufficient to produce a crop by fall given that cattle were moved off the pasture by June. If this strategy is not successful food plots may have to be fenced to exclude cattle, or new food plots developed in areas that cattle are topographically excluded from, or food plots seeded only in the river pastures that are not scheduled for grazing that year.*

10 – The respondent noted that there was no mention of the number of AUMs available by pasture for livestock and wildlife. *As mentioned above AUMs were calculated for each pasture. Cattle stocking rates were then closely matched to the AUMs per pasture per grazing period. Calculated AUMs (NRCS method) allocates ~½ of the above ground vegetative biomass to livestock; ~¼ of the above ground biomass to trampling by cattle; and the remaining ¼ above ground biomass is usually still available to wildlife after cattle grazing. It should also be noted that ½ of the total area of the Beckman WMA and Roe Ranch would not be grazed by cattle each year and thus would also be available to wildlife, in addition to the ¼ of the biomass available to wildlife in the grazed pastures at the end of the grazing period (even more forage would be available to wildlife when wildlife forage pastures prior to the cattle grazing period). However, an accurate accounting of specific plant species forage available to specific wildlife species per pasture per season has not been undertaken. Historic wildlife densities are known. The goal is to monitor wildlife populations and wildlife-important plant species and insure that the vigor and occurrence of these plants is increased under the proposed stocking rate for cattle, which is 46% of historical levels.*

11 – The respondent asked when haying on the WMA will start. *Haying on the Beckman WMA is addressed in the Beckman WMA Haying Lease. Relative to haying on the Beckman the goal is to balance the importance and availability of alfalfa hay fields to deer with good nesting cover for upland birds. The first cutting of alfalfa hay is taken in late June early July. The haying lease requires that alfalfa fields be irrigated in late summer and left uncut for deer and other wildlife. Relative to upland birds: less than ½ of the historic hay ground acres is hayed each year, the river bottom is already good nesting cover in which 2/3rds (at least 1000 acres) will not be grazed by cattle each year, and there are plans to refurbish tame grass pastures and rotated food plots by reseeding plant species that will improve the quality and quantity of the river bottom nesting cover.*

12 – The respondent also made the following recommendations: utilize the public for controlling predators on the Beckman WMA should be considered; methods allowed for big game retrieval on the Beckman WMA should be explained on signs and maps; that unused structures in the floodplain on the Beckman WMA should be removed; that a third alternative to the EA of only grazing the Beckman WMA should be considered; and that the success of the (habitat grazing) plan hinges on supervision by FWP and adherence by the cooperator to details of the operation. *In the case of a third alternative to the EA of only grazing the Beckman WMA – FWP considered this alternative and found it to be less favorable relative to the goals and objectives of WMA*

*management. FWP has considered all of the other recommendations and is working toward implementation.*

13 – The respondent was supportive of the Habitat/Grazing System proposal and felt: that the plan was well thought out; that inclusion of additional acreages owned by the adjacent rancher is a good decision to bring proper vegetation management to areas near the Beckman WMA; and that the agreement for walk-in hunter access to the Roe Ranch, without the influences of guides and outfitters, is excellent. *FWP has noted the respondent's support.*

#### **STIPULATION OF THIS RECORD OF DECISION DOCUMENT**

None.

#### **MODIFICATIONS TO ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS AND MANAGEMENT PLAN**

No modifications to the EA or the Management Plan are recommended.

#### **DECISION**

Utilizing the Environmental Analysis and the Beckman Wildlife Management Area – Roe Ranch Habitat/Grazing System Plan, with accompanying Stipulations and Justifications Management Plan and public comment, a decision must be rendered by FWP that addresses the interests and issues identified for this proposed project. Given results of FWP's analysis coupled with the nature and content of the public comment, acceptance of this habitat grazing system proposal on the Beckman Wildlife Management Area and Roe Ranch is warranted. After review of this proposal and the corresponding public support and comment, it is my recommendation that FWP proceed with the habitat grazing system proposal for the Beckman Wildlife Management Area and Roe Ranch.

Signed,

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#### **Beckman WMA EA Decision Notice Mailing List**

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